

Minutes

RESIDENTS' SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

16 April 2024



HILLINGDON
LONDON

Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre

	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillors Wayne Bridges (Chair), Colleen Sullivan (Vice-Chair), Scott Farley (Opposition Lead), Janet Gardner, Ekta Gohil, Sital Punja and Philip Corthorne</p> <p>Officers Present:</p> <p>Mark Braddock, Senior Democratic Services Manager Nicola Herbert, Head of Waste Stuart Hunt, Head of Green Spaces Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central Services</p> <p>Witnesses Present: Carys Hedley, Director of Services – Trinity</p>
66.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Peter Smallwood with Councillor Philip Corthorne substituting.</p>
67.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>There were no declarations of interest.</p>
68.	<p>TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting dated 13 March 2024 be agreed as an accurate record.</p>
69.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THOSE MARKED PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> <p>It was confirmed that all items of business were in Part I and would be considered in public.</p>
70.	<p>REVIEW OF HOMELESSNESS AND THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY: WITNESS SESSION 2 (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>The Committee held its second witness session relating to its review of homelessness and the customer experience and heard from Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central Services, and from Carys Hedley representing a partner organisation, Trinity.</p> <p>The Corporate Director of Central Services began by discussing the challenges local authorities faced regarding homelessness, highlighting a reduction in private rental accommodation, and increasing unaffordability. He emphasised the difficulty for non-</p>

priority individuals, often single people, to access affordable housing and the Council's reliance on the voluntary sector i.e. organisations such as Trinity and Thames Reach for support. The Select Committee heard that the Council had been working successfully in partnership with Trinity for a number of years.

Carys Hedley, Director of Services at Trinity, addressed the Select Committee detailing Trinity's provision of 231 supported spaces and 41 long-term unsupported accommodation places in Hillingdon. She mentioned the support offered to families fleeing war and the reconnection service available to assist with tenancy sustainment.

Members heard that Trinity worked closely with the Council and most of the referrals they received came from the local authority. Trinity had been experiencing considerable challenges in recent years, particularly in relation to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates. It was now cheaper for people to stay in Trinity accommodation than move into the private rental sector. This was having a significant impact, and the service was becoming stagnant; people were ready to move on but were unable to afford private rentals therefore had nowhere to go. At times, people were offered accommodation outside of the Borough, but they were often reluctant to move away from a familiar area and their support network in Hillingdon. Another concern raised related to the pressure from the number of families and single homeless individuals housed in hotels.

The Select Committee was informed that the current supported housing offered floating support but did not have staff on site full time. Many of the referrals received were from those with complex needs including drug, alcohol and mental health needs. Trinity therefore planned to create a new service offering a specialist housing programme with full-time live-in support, in addition to the supported housing currently provided. However, it was acknowledged that this was extremely challenging given the lack of housing stock in the Borough.

Councillors sought further clarification regarding the nature of the specialist housing offer. It was explained that the plan was for this housing to assist in addressing the need for supported housing with on-site support for individuals with complex needs, including drug, alcohol, and mental health issues.

Members enquired about the impact of other boroughs placing residents in Hillingdon and vice versa. It was confirmed that Trinity prioritised Hillingdon residents but sometimes accepted others due to lack of suitable referrals. The difficulty in encouraging residents to accept housing offers outside their familiar borough was also highlighted.

The Select Committee sought to understand the processes of working with the Council and how to improve them. The strong relationship between Trinity and the rough sleeper team was highlighted but it was noted that there were challenges such as perceived lack of empathy from housing officers, communication issues, and the intimidating environment of the Civic Centre. A rotating system for housing officers to avoid burnout, retraining on language used with clients, and creating a more welcoming environment at the Civic Centre were suggested. It was noted that a rota system to ensure housing officers were not always working in a client-facing role would be beneficial. It was also recommended that staff receive further training regarding the use of appropriate language when dealing with people seeking housing support; these individuals were often in a desperate situation, and it was very difficult for them to hear that they were not considered a priority.

Members acknowledged the need for better systems and technology for case

handovers and welcomed suggestions for improving the Civic Centre environment. The Director of Services at Trinity recommended that security staff be trained to be more approachable and friendly when clients presented for support with housing matters. It was suggested that plants would make the environment appear more welcoming as would smiling friendly staff. A family-friendly environment with sofas and toys for the children was also suggested.

The Select Committee sought further information regarding the support for tenants to sustain tenancies. The importance of correct referrals in the first place and comprehensive support to assist clients to live independently and prevent a cycle of homelessness was affirmed.

In response to Members' concerns regarding safeguarding young people, it was confirmed that Trinity conducted individual risk assessments and worked closely with local services to ensure support and safety. If young people were considered too high risk, it was unfortunately not possible to provide housing for them.

Councillors enquired about the impact of asylum seekers in hotels on homelessness. Members heard that Trinity predicted worsening conditions due to quick eviction notices from hotels which was adding to the street homelessness problem. It was noted that the Home Office's strategy to accelerate asylum claims had led to a high number of single, non-priority individuals needing housing.

Members addressed the empathy factor and staff turnover in housing teams. To safeguard the mental health of staff, the Director of Services at Trinity recommended well-being measures, such as regular team meetings where staff could discuss difficult cases, flexible working hours, 'double up working' for challenging cases, away days, regular annual leave, and enforced rest periods to ensure staff members got the respite they needed.

The Corporate Director acknowledged the challenge for officers of not having immediate housing solutions for evicted individuals and emphasised the need for a strong prevention strategy and a healthy supply of affordable housing. The Council was working towards this, but it was proving very challenging. With regard to support for officers, Members were informed that the Council had invested more resources to create a wellbeing room for staff. Case work support supervision had also been introduced. Improvements were being made but there was still a long way to go. It was confirmed that workforce planning and development was a key part of future plans, but it was acknowledged that recruiting and retaining staff was challenging.

Councillors discussed the mental health of housing staff and the "perfect storm" of reliance on affordable private rented accommodation. The Corporate Director agreed on the importance of good communication and outlined plans to improve customer experience and engagement. It was noted that residents often had to call up repeatedly to request an update on their housing case which was frustrating and upsetting. The Council was working to address this – one possible solution would be for housing officers to provide residents with a weekly update. It was acknowledged that there was room for improvement, but plans were in place to achieve this.

Members raised concerns regarding the lack of empathy and judgmental behaviour of housing staff towards clients, particularly those facing domestic abuse. It was suggested that training should include input from clients themselves to help staff understand and respect the experiences of those they served.

In response to this, Trinity highlighted the benefits of hiring staff with lived experiences to ensure non-judgmental treatment. Members were informed that Trinity gathered

feedback from residents through annual surveys to improve services and training, stressing fair and respectful treatment for all.

Members sought further clarification regarding the selection process for social prescribers for the July witness session, noting an apparent unexpected choice in the scoping report. It was confirmed that Democratic Services would follow this up and respond on this matter outside of the meeting.

The Chair concluded the session by thanking the attendees, with the discussion underscoring the importance of empathy, understanding, and client feedback in addressing homelessness.

RESOLVED:

That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the evidence heard at the witness session and sought clarification as necessary in the context of its review of Homelessness and the Customer Journey in Hillingdon.

71. **WEED CONTROL** (*Agenda Item 6*)

Stuart Hunt, Head of Green Spaces, was in attendance to respond to Members' queries regarding his report on Weed Control as set out in the agenda pack.

Councillors expressed concerns about the challenges faced in the previous year and questioned the Council's preparedness to ensure better service delivery in the current year.

The Head of Green Spaces acknowledged that there had been staffing and machinery challenges from the contractor, in addition to weather-related issues. He assured Members that organisational changes, including additional staff and backup machines, had been implemented to improve performance in the future.

Members sought further clarification regarding the Council's recourse for the contractor's potential defaulting. It was confirmed that mechanisms for improvement and penalties were in place and were written into the contract.

The Select Committee raised concerns about the EU's ban on glyphosate and the UK's licensing extension, questioning the research behind its safety. It was explained that glyphosate had been approved for use until December 2025 and that independent research was being conducted. The Head of Green Spaces also mentioned that if glyphosate were banned, the alternatives would not be as effective in terms of weed control. The Council limited its spraying and glyphosate was only used as and when required.

Members sought further clarity regarding alternative weed control products in light of modern technology. It was confirmed that the Council relied on external research groups for guidance.

In response to further questions from the Committee in respect of lessons learned from the previous year's contractor performance, Members were reassured that more checks and balances were now in place to monitor performance.

In response to a question about contingency plans, it was confirmed that the Council had backup measures, including agency staff and licensed personnel, to manually weed if necessary.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services noted the contents of the report and the update on weed control measures going forward for the next 12 months.

72. FOOD WASTE - SUCCESS OF THE SCHEME (*Agenda Item 7*)

Nicola Herbert, Head of Waste, was in attendance to respond to Members' questions in respect of her report on the Success of the Council's Food Waste Scheme as set out in the agenda pack.

With regard to the recent engagement exercise that had taken place to increase resident take-up, Members enquired where the targeted engagement areas for food waste collection had taken place. It was confirmed that the focus had mainly been in the southern boroughs, particularly Botwell, based on crew feedback and lower participation rates.

At the request of the Committee, it was agreed that, after the meeting, the Head of Waste would provide a list of the sites that had taken part in the food waste in flats trials, a list of the flatted sites that currently had a food waste bin and a list of the wards that had been visited during the 2023/2024 door knocking programme.

Members sought clarity on current participation rates for food waste recycling, noting past efforts to increase them. The Committee was advised that targeted engagement had improved registration for the service from 20% to 60% of nearly 5000 targeted properties.

In response to questions regarding the continuation of green roadshows to boost food waste recycling, Members heard that these continued to be very successful, with 19 events in the previous year resulting in 240 new sign-ups.

Councillors questioned the appearance and functionality of food waste units installed in flats. It was explained that they were tailored to each site, with a focus on hygienic and user-friendly designs to encourage use and minimise cleaning. It was agreed that an image of the Glasdon food waste housing unit would be provided to the Committee after the meeting.

Further concerns were raised by Members about potential odour and vermin issues with food waste wheelie bins. The Head of Waste assured the Committee that trials showed no such problems and that the Council had measures to maintain cleanliness and safe distance from residences.

Councillors sought further clarity regarding future targets for food waste caddy distribution and stock management. It was confirmed that the goal was to add 20,000 properties to the service by the end of the financial year. Regular ordering approximately every three months would ensure supply.

In response to Members' questions about the provision of biodegradable food waste bags and their durability, it was confirmed that residents would receive a yearly supply, with a maximum of two rolls per property to prevent wastage and inefficiency. If needed, additional bags could be ordered online or sourced from local libraries.

The importance of communicating the environmental impact of food waste in landfills was highlighted by the Select Committee. In response to this, it was clarified that, while Hillingdon Council did not landfill general waste, reducing food waste remained environmentally beneficial due to its high carbon content.

Members enquired about the financial benefits of food waste recycling and the use of

the anaerobic digestion facility in Mitcham. It was explained that the cost savings from waste disposal were significant, and the facility's ability to sell bioenergy to the National Grid enabled lower processing costs.

Councillors enquired why garden and food waste were processed separately. It was confirmed that the current facility in Mitcham did not offer dry anaerobic digestion, and the decision had been made by the West London Waste Authority for economic reasons. At the request of the Committee Members, it was agreed that, after the meeting, the Head of Waste would clarify whether dry anaerobic digestion had been considered for the processing of mixed food and garden waste.

In response to further questions from the Select Committee, it was confirmed that food waste recycling had not replaced garden composting which continued at a significant scale in Harefield.

With regard to the nature of businesses involved in the food waste trial, Councillors were informed that hotels and cash-and-carries had participated. The importance of proper disposal without packaging to avoid additional costs was highlighted.

Members enquired whether high food waste-producing businesses would require more frequent collections. It was confirmed that the Council offered flexible collections to all businesses and would assess the need for increased frequency on a case-by-case basis.

Members expressed concerns about health and safety implications for food establishments, particularly regarding waste security and potential issues with vermin. They questioned the impact of the Council's service on these matters. In response to this, the Select Committee was assured that the containers provided by the Council were secure and had lids to prevent decomposition and vermin attraction within a week. The Head of Waste mentioned that businesses were not obligated to use the Council's service if it was not commercially viable for them to do so and could opt for private contractors instead. It was further confirmed that non-compliance would be addressed by enforcement teams.

The Chair, Councillor Bridges, thanked the Head of Waste for her informative responses and attendance.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee:

- 1. Noted the success of the food waste recycling scheme to date; and**
- 2. Noted the planned works to continue the expansion of the food waste recycling service.**

73. **FORWARD PLAN** (*Agenda Item 8*)

RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan be noted.

74. **WORK PROGRAMME** (*Agenda Item 9*)

RESOLVED: That the Work Programme be noted.

The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.15 pm.

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Liz Penny, Democratic Services Officer on epenny@hillington.gov.uk. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, officers, the press and members of the public.